

A Highwayman's Christmas Lay

by J.C. Coll

It was a shrewd night, as shrewd as a witch, and, faith, between the spirit of Christmas and the sack at the hostelry my humor was much too racy and fit to gather his Majesty's precious portraits. I winked at a cockle in a coach that disputed not my stand in the middle of the highway and blessed the mankin on the boot.

"Too rare a night," thought I, and the nag, fitting my whim, broke into a canter, her nose trimmed across the bracken to my Lord Mayor's. I went through the wood, circumspectly, and chose t'other side of the barn following the shadow, where, as I drew near with as much stealth as the mare allowed, I heard the voice of one of my lord's varlets. I slipped to the ground and made over like a squirrel; he was a pink-faced bantam and sniffled and swore in an anger-hard voice.

"Hillo!" cried I, most sharply, "i' God's name, man. Doth wag your wench's tongue while a gentleman of feathers and blood seeks Yuletide cheer? My challenge, I warrant, took him in much surprise. In twinkling I had the nape of his smock strong in my hand and forced him to a knee.

"Why," says I, pleasantly, my barker on his loin, "I'm a good-humored bird, I am, and mean you no hurt; but, prithee, tell me why an honest yokel doth preach other than a Sabbath sermon on a Christmas eve?" His jaw was crackling with fright, and I shook him as a hound might, the better to fortify his quaking soul.

"There's no Christmas coming to my master, asking of your pardon, sir," whimpered the fellow, rasping his pate with an arm, "cess to 'im—a flaying for 'im and a galling of 'is wine in 'is stomach with the pleasant Christmas abreast of us and not a sprig of greenery or a scrape of hair or catgut will we have at the grange." I chuckled well, for the old spavin tickled me; and, faith, I fashioned a design that twinned my humor to a nicety. I pulled him to his feet, and quoth I:

"You're a man of mine own jolly kidney, and rot me, your waistcoat full and more of Christmas roystering if you follow my bent." Whereupon I gave him my scheme, which took a while in the telling, but in the end he wagged his chin and guffawed. And my plan was that he coach his fellows in the hall in thiswise, that they hide the firearms and steel, that I gain entrance to the grange, that they try to oust me with great show, that victory must be mine: no less, in short, than that I must take possession of the grange and his lordship for one night

We clapped palms upon the compact. I withdrew a space into the darkness and tethered the roan under the rain shed, and when I had given my ambassador good leeway, sallied up the terrace to my lord's entry. My knuckles and the stout oak met ringingly, and the echo was not dead when the trap opened cautiously and I beheld what in the gloom I had monstrous ado to decide was an ear trumpet of tin.

I thrust my toe hard to the jamb and flung the door wide, shook my pistol in the trumpet with a hellish clatter, growled an oath at the cully in patens at the door and strode ponderously through my lord's hall and at the stairs straightway. The scamp in patens, whom a glance sidewise told me was my friend of the stable, darted ahead ("he coached well," thinks I) and left his lantern, which served me in good stead. I dashed it with a loud bang on the balustrade. Instantly the stair was choked with the servants, armed (how I laughed inwardly) with kitchen hardware. We stared hard at each other, winking the while, and our breaths puffed into the cold air like smoke.

"Blood and body 'o me," cries a voice from above, and I bowed (very politely, mind you, winking atween) to my lord's black clad shins sheening down the steps. "Body and blood 'o me," he rambled on, manikins, doth stand here gossiping with a scamp of the road and my person and goods in jeopardy! Am I awake, or is it a fool's holiday? Gad! a rare devotion, this," and he cuffed one of the hinds over upon me. Now, I was in a great taking, for this was the signal, and not e'en time enough to inquire of his lordship's health. They were all at me at once, a clumsy, heavy-paunched lot. Knocking the foremost aside I won through the press and bounded up the stair. My lord essayed clumsily to evade my rush, but I caught him by the frock and whirled him down. Then pulling myself to the topmost step like a play actor I drew my steel and made busy.

"Your Lordship," I shouted the while, "I trust is enjoying tolerable health?" For reply he scurried away to the empty arm rack, while we who were left amused ourselves famously by laying on the floor boards most grievously, I with my sword and they with their scullery gear. We did not desist when we heard the master returning. It was well played, they cannily falling back by degrees, panting until each man's lungs seemed a leaky bellows and raising a great moan over imaginary wounds. And my lord was swearing as soft as a prayer behind the balustrade.

"Gad," says I in high humor, "loth am I to lose such sport, and would tarry for your wind. But, bury me, my stomach heaves for supper." I opened my pistol on a glass fire shade to sharpen my words. "How does yours, sir?" the while toeing a servant toward the kitchen door.

"I'll have pipe and sack and a fire in the great room—a roaring fire, mind ye, and a fiddler and the wenches. Green from the wood, too," I stormed, and the below stairs folk like sheep watched me dally with the old boar. "Lag not, so help me, for I'll flay every man Jack of you that's overslow to join me, excepting you, my lord."

So sweetly saying I laid hold on him once more and bound him to a chair, he not offering resistance, but gazing with eyes that threatened to flee their sockets and lower lip a-waggle.

Now the wenches, who had been told of the jest, joined us, whispering and giggling. We stepped with no loss of time over the great room's threshold, my lord, borne in his chair, in the van. Him we sent into retirement suitable for his years and sour humor in a screened corner. Faith, my part was easy, now. The serving folk brisked about with pipes and punch, and fell to as if to the manor born.

The most buxom wench was elected to sit on the table with the punch and we footed it around her merrily, tapping her boots with our pipe stems. So, too, we sang carols and "The Sailor Lass" full many times. My lord arriving famously in the bass with a medley of oaths, and myself with divers commands for heartier testimonials of joy, at which they shouted and rubbed their sides and brake their pipes.

So the night went on and the rim of the woods whitened and I stole out by the rear and mounted the nag, and when I was safely away I paused and barked to the shouts from the grange. I was never the one that knew whom the greater laugh was on, the witless servants or my lord, the mayor.

